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ABSTRACT

This digest, based on a larger document titled, "Homeless and in Need of Special Education," by L. Juane Heflin and Kathryn Rudy, focuses on educational aspects of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act. Briefly discussed are: the effects of homelessness on children (e.g., increased health problems); the educational implications of homelessness (e.g., low attendance, unsatisfactory academic progress, poor self-concept); and the educator's role (e.g., encouraging interagency collaboration and providing remediation and tutoring of basic skills). Also noted is the McKinney Act's education portion, Title VII-B, which guarantees homeless children access to education, discourages districts from using restrictive enrollment criteria, and requires appointment of state coordinators who must identify special educational needs of homeless students. Includes 16 references. (DB)

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DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS WHO ARE HOMELESS

L. Juane Heflin

The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (P. L. 100-77), defines homeless individuals as those who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; have a primary nighttime residence that is (a) a supervised, publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill); (b) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or (c) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.

There are between 3,000,000 to 4,000,000 homeless individuals in the United States (Tower & White, 1989). Almost 90% of homeless families are headed by females. Women and children represent up to one-half of the homeless population (Bassuk & Rosenberg, 1988), and the average age of the homeless child is six years. (Kozol, 1990).

The decade of the eighties has heralded a deterioration of services available to individuals who are homeless. Dramatic fiscal cuts in federal welfare programs have reduced funding for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), food stamp, and nutrition programs (Hope & Young, 1986). During the Reagan administration, nearly half a million families lost all welfare payments, a million people lost usage of food stamp programs, and two million children were deleted from school lunch programs. The Women, Infant and Children (WIC) nutrition program is unable to provide services to even half of the individuals who meet their eligibility criteria (Kozol). In addition, economic circumstances and no-fault divorce laws are generating a rapid increase in the number of families who find themselves homeless.

What are the Effects of Homelessness on Children?

Although homelessness is potentially devastating to anyone, it appears to have the most detrimental effects on children and youth. Homeless children have more health problems than matched children of low socioeconomic status who are living at home. Homeless families typically do not seek health services for their children until the child's health forces them to do so. One-fourth to one-third of homeless individuals have chronic health problems (Wasem, 1989). In comparison to low socioeconomic status children living at home, homeless children are three times more likely to exhibit elevated lead levels (Alperstein, Rappaport, & Flanigan, 1988). Research indicates that elevated lead levels may produce neurologic functioning deficits, leading

to serious educational implications for children who are homeless.

What are the Educational Implications of Homelessness?

Educational intervention has unfortunately proven to be an elusive opportunity for many homeless children and youth. It is estimated that 43% of homeless school-aged children do not attend school (Ely, 1987). The inability to meet specific enrollment criteria such as residency requirements, guardianship rights, presentation of previous school records, and documentation of medical history, including inoculation records, act as a barrier to exclude students who are homeless from school attendance. In addition, students who are homeless may not have transportation or school supply resources.

Homeless children and youth who do make their way into the education systems may exhibit unsatisfactory school progress. Research indicates that students who are homeless have a greater chance of encountering difficulty in making transitions, being successful with academic tasks, interacting positively with peers, and demonstrating a healthy self-concept (Stronge & Tenhouse, 1990). In a study conducted in Boston, it was found that 40% of the students were failing or performing below average work, 25% were in special classes, and 43% had repeated one grade (Bassuk & Rubin, 1987). Homeless children are also more likely to develop behavior problems than their peers (Bassuk & Rosenberg). Although clearly at risk for academic failure, the transient nature of most homeless students makes the time consuming task of assessment and referral for special services almost impossible. Given the high percentages of homeless students experiencing school problems, it can be inferred that students who could be eligible for special education services are not receiving such because of their homelessness.

The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (P. L. 100-77), passed in 1987, is the most comprehensive emergency aid program for America's homeless. Included in the Act are policies and procedures for guaranteeing the provision of educational services. The educational portion of the law, Title VII-B, is administered by the U.S. Department of Education. This educational subtitle guarantees children and youth who are homeless the same access to elementary and secondary education as children who are not homeless. The Act discourages districts from using residency, guardianship, or other enrollment criteria to prevent a student from attending school. According to the McKinney Act, each state must appoint a coordinator for

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the education of homeless children and youth, who, among other activities, must identify special educational needs of the homeless. If they meet eligibility requirements, students who are homeless must be offered special services such as compensatory educational programs, special education programs, services for the gifted and talented, programs for students whose native language is not English, vocational education programs, and school meal programs (Stronge & Tenhouse). In 1990, the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act was again reauthorized and strengthened in its ability to meet the educational needs of children and youth who are homeless.

What's the Educator's Role in Alleviating the Problem?

Children and youth need to learn to overcome the potentially cyclic and devastating effects of a homeless situation. An appropriate education is the most promising intervention available. As directed by federal precedents and the continuous work of advocates, schools must increase their efforts to meet the needs of homeless students, including those who need special services to benefit from their educational opportunities. Realistically, schools must recognize that homeless children and youth bring with them a variety of preexisting hindrances. Emotional stress, behavioral disorders, physical anomalies, poor health, and developmental delays created by a transient lifestyle, as well as cognitive deficits due to missed schooling, inhibit the ability to learn.

Interagency collaboration is essential to developing effective services for homeless students. Issues such as education, health care, mental health, housing, and alcohol or other drug abuse can be addressed through a coordinated, multidisciplinary approach. It is important for schools to provide a referral system, designating someone with knowledge of area resources who can provide students with referrals to appropriate agencies. In addition, schools can provide remediation and tutoring of basic skills, after school and extended day services, awareness training for personnel, and program continuity and stability. Teachers can assist students who are homeless by providing personal space—space in the school that is the student's own and marking the space with a symbol of the student's identity; supporting identity development; and establishing a structured environment. School personnel must learn to plan for and incorporate homeless students into their programs for whatever period of time the students are able to attend.

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